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ABSTRACT

A study examined gender differences in reading attitudes among school age children. The hypothesis was that school age children in grades K-8 regard reading as a predominately feminine activity. Subjects were 269 students, grades K-8, from a low-income, urban school setting. Students completed Reading Attitude Surveys, modified from the Downing Object Activity Opinion Survey. The first survey was given to grades K-3, and the second was presented to students in grades 4-8. Results indicated that the overall majority of students see reading as an activity more suitable for girls, supporting the study's hypothesis. Findings suggest that these perceptions intensify with age for both boys and girls. Findings also revealed that the most dramatic increase in this perception seems to take place around grade 5. (Contains 3 tables of data and 25 references; related literature and 2 sample survey forms are appended.) (Author/CR)

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ED 407 653

Gender Differences in Reading Attitudes

By

Eileen McKenna

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the

Master of Arts Degree

Kean College of New Jersey

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ABSTRACT

The research study was undertaken to further investigate the perception that among school children in the United States that reading is a predominantly girl activity. Two surveys were conducted in a low income, urban school setting. Two hundred and sixty nine students from kindergarten through eighth grade were asked to complete Reading Attitude Surveys, modified from the Downing Object Activity Opinion Survey. The results further confirmed previous work that students in elementary school perceive reading as a girl activity. This study also concluded that these perceptions intensify with age for both boys and girls.

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I would like to thank Dr. Mazurkiewicz for his helpful guidance and for his interest in the subject.

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In recent years, there has been increasing observation among reading teachers and education professionals that boys and girls of school age and older view reading as a feminine activity. It is important to verify and better understand this and to address this problem. The objective of this research study and analysis is to determine if there really are gender differences in reading attitudes among school age children.

A review of the literature suggests that North American boys and girls of school age or older regard reading as a feminine activity. It may be because society views girls as better readers, girls become better readers. As they perform better in reading, they tend to enjoy it more than boys. There is a generally popular view that, on the average, young girls score better than boys on tests of reading readiness and early achievement (Maccoby and Downing, 1980). Most studies using readiness measures show significant differences in favor of girls over boys (e.g., Anderson, Hughes & Dixon, 1957; Balow, 1963; Dykstr & Tinney, 1969). The "Survey of Reading Attitudes" (Egin, Wallbrown & Brown, 1976) was administered to 312 fifth and sixth graders to determine how children view sex differences and developmental changes in relation to reading. This test is designed to measure eight dimensions of reading attitudes. The results of this survey indicated that in each of eight categories tested, the girls results were considerably more desirable. The eight categories which this test is involved with include: 1. Expressed Reading Difficulty which indicates how students feel about themselves having difficulty with reading and are willing to acknowledge the existence of a problem; 2. Reading as a Direct Reinforcement which indicates the extent to which students feel that they receive direct reinforcement from their friends, parents and teachers for involvement in reading type activities

for their intrinsic value as a source of information, learning and emotional satisfaction, i.e., intrinsic motivation; 3. Reading as Enjoyment which indicates the extent to which students perceive themselves as valuing reading type activities for the intrinsic value as a source of information, learning and emotional satisfaction, i.e., intrinsic motivation; 4. Alternative Learning Modes which indicate the extent to which students express a preference for using alternatives other than reading when they are faced with a learning task; 5. Reading Anxiety which indicates the extent to which a student becomes emotionally upset and/or experiences unpleasant physical sensations for feelings when engaging in or thinking about reading activities; 6. Reading Group which indicates students attitudes toward their reading group and the instructional materials used in the group; 7. Silent vs. Oral Reading which indicates student's relative preference for silent rather than oral reading activities; and 8. Comics which indicate the extent to which students enjoy reading comics and devote their time and energy to this activity.

An Elementary Reading Attitude Survey, or ERAS (McKenna and Kear, 1990) also gave attention to gender differences. This survey was based on the cartoon character Garfield and students respond to facial expressions. Responses were quantified by assigning points to each item. Results indicated that girls possessed significantly more positive attitudes toward recreation reading at all grade levels than did boys, a gap that widened with age. Furthermore, girls attitudes toward academic reading were more positive at every grade level than boys.

Additional insights were gained in understanding these differences with the development of the McKenna model of reading attitude acquisition. This model was put together in an effort to understand more clearly the long term development of reading attitudes (McKenna, 1994).

McKenna synthesized the work of Mathewson and others. The McKenna model gives attention to the effects of gender and ethnicity. The model incorporates normative beliefs (those concerned with the expectations of significant others. These beliefs also play a formative role in the development of attitudes. If a child's cultural environment encourages, models and reinforces reading, more positive attitudes should result. Gender specific beliefs concerning what others expect about reading may explain consistent findings that girls tend to possess more positive attitudes than boys (Anderson, Tollefson, and Gilbert, 1985; Aokov and Fishback, 1973; Rosstcher, 1989; Shapiro, 1980 Smith, 1990; Stevenson and Newman, 1986; Wallbrown, Levine and Engin, 1981). The situation is complicated, however, by the fact that girls tend, as a group, to outperform boys on reading measures (Mullis, Campbell and Farastrup, 1993).

HYPOTHESIS:

To add information on this topic, the following study was undertaken. It was hypothesized that school age children in grades K-8 regard reading as a predominately feminine activity.

PROCEDURES:

Permission from the Principal was obtained to administer Reading Attitude Surveys. The subjects consisted of 269 students, grades K through 8, from a low income, urban school setting. In each grade level, one class was randomly selected to participate.

Two surveys were conducted. The first survey was given to grades K - 3. Teachers were asked to read from a list of ten items. Items included were names of activities. Students were asked to identify each as masculine or feminine. This survey was a modified version of the Downing Object Activity Opinion Survey. (See appendix A)

The second survey (appendix B) was presented to students in grades 4 - 8. Students were given a list of 38 written descriptions of activities taken form the Downing Object Opinion Survey. The situations were more age appropriate. Again, students were asked to identify each activity as masculine or feminine. Both surveys were administered by the student's classroom teacher

RESULTS:

The results of the survey can best be understood by an examination of the following three tables. As seen from the presentation of the results in table I, the overall majority of students throughout grades K -8 see reading as an activity more suitable for girls. This perception in general continues to escalate as the children advance toward grade 8. The most dramatic increase in this perception seems to take place around the fifth grade. When children failed to respond to the question, it was scored as a non-committal response. This may have been because they had no opinion.

Table I

% OF CLASS VIEWING READING AS A BOY/GIRL ACTIVITY

GRADES	TOTAL STUDENTS	BOY ACTIVITY	GIRL ACTIVITY	NON-COMMITTAL
K	30	23.3	76.7	0
1	32	18.8	81.2	0
2	29	13.9	82.7	3.4
3	28	7.2	89.2	3.6
4	32	15.7	84.3	0
5	31	0	100	0
6	29	6.9	93.1	0
7	27	0	100	0
8	31	0	100	0

As shown in table II, girls overwhelmingly perceive reading as a girl activity. Again, it is shown that as the children progress in grade, their perception increases that reading is a girl activity. Girls in the fifth grade up through eighth grade unanimously see reading as a girl activity. The lack of response from the one student in third grade was scored as a non-response.

TABLE II

ATTITUDES OF GIRLS ON READING BY GRADE

GRADES	% OF GIRLS PERCEIVING READING AS A BOY ACTIVITY	% OF GIRLS PERCEIVING READING AS A GIRL ACTIVITY	% NON-RESPONSE
K	6.7	93.3	0
1	16.7	83.3	0
2	12.5	87.5	0
3	6.6	86.7	6.7
4	12.5	87.5	0
5	0	100	0
6	0	100	0
7	0	100	0
8	0	100	0

As shown in table III below, boys also see reading as a girl activity. However, responses to this were not as strong as were the girls as shown in table II. With the exception of the fifth grade, at least some of the boys in each grade saw reading as a boy activity. The non-committal score was given to one student in the second grade who failed to respond.

TABLE III

ATTITUDES OF BOYS ON READING BY GRADE

GRADES	% OF BOYS PERCEIVING READING AS A BOY ACTIVITY	% OF BOYS PERCEIVING READING AS A GIRL ACTIVITY	NON-RESPONSE
K	40	60	0
1	20	80	0
2	15.5	76.9	7.6
3	7.7	92.3	0
4	18.8	81.2	0
5	0	100	0
6	15.4	84.6	0
7	0	100	0
8	0	100	0

CONCLUSIONS:

The data from this study further supports the findings of previous research in this area and two major conclusions can be made:

(1) This study strongly suggests that students in the K to 8 classes perceive reading as a girl activity.

(2) It also shows that these perceptions intensify with age both for boys and girls.

Society needs to be made better aware of this issue and forcefully deal with it by promoting more understanding that it should not be a gender-based activity as well as providing more encouragement for boys to participate in reading activities. Perhaps, more research focus could be made on other countries where this phenomenon does not exist and recommendations can be formulated on how better we can address this problem in the United States.

Gender Differences in Reading Attitudes:

Related Literature

The Mazurkiewicz study (1960) toward reading attitudes appears to have opened a can of worms, so to speak. His study of 1500 boys and girls and their parents attitudes toward reading showed a positive relationship between father's and son's attitudes toward reading. Using an M - F Inventory, he found that sons had essentially the same attitudes toward reading as their fathers. He also found in this study that reading attitudes of girls and boys are influenced by socio-cultural factors and that boys and their fathers thought that reading was mostly a feminine activity.

Healy (1963) investigated more effective ways of developing a genuine love of reading in children. The subjects for her study were three fifth grade groups in an upper middle class neighborhood in Miami, Florida. Attitudes toward reading were determined by questionnaires, observation, pupil response to books and magazines, and reactions to assignments involving silent reading. Intelligence was determined by the California Mental Maturity Test, and achievement by the Metropolitan Achievement Test A review of the data revealed that reading failures of boys may be due to the lack of visuo-perceptual development in the primary grades and too early and forced reading and writing instruction.

Balow (1963) conducted a study to determine whether there are sex differences in reading among first grade students. Participating in his study were thirteen classes of 302 children, 151 boys and 151 girls, in a first grade middle class suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota. Tests used to access attitudes were the Gates Reading Readiness Test, the Lorge-Thorndike Intelligence Test, and the Gates Primary Reading Test, each at various intervals of the year. Significant differences in reading readiness and reading achievement were found in favor of the girls.

Kagan (1964) indicated that children acquire sex-role standards by school age and that

boys as young as age three are aware that some activities and objects are seen as more masculine in our culture. Also, young girls are less rigid in their perceptions and often prefer masculine activities

Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) report that males show preferences for activities with their own sex. White males avoid stereo typically female tasks, females are seen as less rigid. They conclude that all these differences are attributed to social pressures on boys for behaving in sex-inappropriate ways..

Kennedy and Halinski (1975) studied whether there are gender differences in reading attitudes among secondary school students. The first phase of the study was creating a reading attitude instrument. This was used in a survey designed to elicit the actual thoughts and vocabulary of secondary students in regard to reading. Students were instructed to respond to open-ended questions such as "I enjoy reading because....". The secondary phase consisted of using actual students terminology to develop a ninety-item instrument. Five hundred secondary students were asked to respond by using a four-point scale. Responses ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The survey included statements such as "Reading helps me form opinions." The last phase of the study was concerned with determining the validity and reliability of this instrument. A revised instrument was administered to 977 additional students in a Midwestern secondary school. An analysis of variance procedures was used to determine results. The female attitudes toward reading were significantly higher using this instrument.

Downing et al (1976) studied the gender differences among several countries. He concluded that in Denmark and Japan reading is regarded by males at all age levels as a masculine activity. In the other countries, reading was rated masculine by the youngest age sample, but feminine by the older age samples. Findings in the U.S. and Canada were the same.

There was a change in boys' perceptions of reading as a masculine activity to a feminine activity between ages one and four. This provides support for the societal-cultural theories of sex differences in reading.

Johnson's study (1976) further developed the idea that reading attitudes among the sexes are affected by socio-cultural influences. He compared these influences in several countries including the United States, Canada, Nigeria and England. The results indicated that children In the United States and Canada strongly perceive reading as a girl activity. In contrast, students in England and Nigeria felt that reading is more suitable for boys.

Downing, Dwyer, Feitelson, Jansen, Mathihaldi, Eeggi, Sakamoto, Tayler, Thackray and Thompson (1979) conducted a study related to sex-role attitudes. Subjects involved included students from grade 1 through adulthood from Canada, Denmark, England, Finland, Israel, Japan and the U.S.A. A test booklet was given containing pictures of items related to reading as well as items thought not to be related to reading. Each person was asked to indicate whether the object would be more suitable for a six-year old girl or boy. Results showed that each country had their own consistent role expectations although they were different among each other.

Steiner (1981) presented a paper at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Los Angeles, California, on her study of the sex differences in reading achievement and the sex-typing of reading. First through fourth grade students from two parochial schools were used in her study. Her study included the relationship between sex-typed perceptions of reading and reading achievement. Secondly, her study discussed the sex-typed perceptions between grades one and four. Thirdly, her study examined variables that discriminate sex-appropriate and sex-inappropriate perceptions of reading. In contrast to

traditional attitudes, she suggests the possibility of a new trend which moves away from the belief that reading is more appropriate for girls than boys. Also, this study concludes that when reading was regarded as appropriate for both sexes, there were no significant differences in reading achievement.

Blah and Chomin (1981) conducted research to examine reading attitudes. A Survey of Reading Attitudes (Wallbrown, Brown and Engin, 1976) was administered to 344 inner-city children from four public, elementary schools in Detroit, Michigan. The sample included 173 males and 171 females, divided between 90 white and 254 black children. " The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences" (SPSS; Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner and Bent, 1975) was used to analyze the results. Among other factors, results of this study indicated that in each category tested, the girls results were more desirable.

Helfeldt's research (1983) revealed that work is very limited and additional effort is needed to understand reading attitudes in terms of neurological factors. He tried to explain how various cultures utilize neurological systems in different ways and these differences affect the children's reading attitudes. He also found that attitudes are affected by biological differences. Infant girls were found to have more developed auditory abilities while infant boys were more visual and better kinesthetic learners.

Anderson, Tollefson, and Gilbert's (1985) study examined the reading attitudes among gifted children. A Likert scale was used to determine attitudes of these children in regard to reading. Participating in the study were 276 gifted students in grades 1 - 12. It was concluded that most students, when given a choice, regarded reading as a feminine activity. Also, this feeling escalated as the students got older.

Parker and Paradis (1986) examined reading attitudes in the primary and intermediate

grades. To assess attitudes, The Heathington Primary and The Heathington Intermediate surveys were used. It was concluded that both primary and intermediate students regard reading as an activity more appropriate for girls. Participating in their study were 10 students from 24 classes in the Rocky Mountains.

Dwer and Reed (1989) studied the effects of sustained silent reading on attitudes of secondary students. A pre and post test was given to measure attitudes. It was concluded that girls scores increased slightly on the post test, while boys scores decreased. Their study proves that the secondary students perceive reading as an activity more appropriate for girls.

Ross and Fletch (1989) studied reading attitudes of children in relation to their environment, grade level and sex. The population for the survey consisted of 189 children from three rural schools in Middle Tennessee, 209 children from an inner-city school in Camden, New Jersey, and 202 children from a school in a university town in Tennessee. Participants were given a multiple-choice questionnaire which included knowledge of literature, attitudes toward it, and exposure to it. A three way analysis of variance was done to analyze results. In this study, differences were found to exist primarily by school type and grade level. Differences between sexes were minimal, with girls showing generally greater knowledge, more positive attitudes and more exposure than boys wherever differences did exist. The researchers made note that these differences would have been less if teachers and librarians had provided more books featuring strong male characters and parent expectations did not favor the girls.

Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1990) showed that females, ages 9, 13, and 17, outperformed males. This data states that reading proficiency of males was less than that of females. The gap between the sexes was about the same in 1990 as it was in 1971.

McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth (1995) surveyed students' attitudes toward reading for both academic and recreational purposes. A sample of 18,185 United States children were used in studying the range of children from grades 1 through 6. Students were asked to respond to a pictorial rating scale. Scores were analyzed on the basis of gender, grade level, ethnicity, reading ability and the use of basal readers. Results indicated that reading attitudes were dynamic over time. The researchers made several conclusions. First, recreational and academic reading preferences decrease negatively and gradually through the elementary school years. Second, trends towards negative recreational reading preferences were related to ability. Finally, girls as a group, possessed more favorable attitudes than boys at all grade levels, toward both academic and recreational reading. In regard to recreational reading, the gap widened with age. In the case of academic reading, it remained about the same. They also eliminated the fact that gender differences were related to ability.

Reports on Literacy Programs (November 1996) state that American schoolboys generally score lower than girls on standardized tests. Reports also indicate that more boys are referred to remedial reading programs. One possibility made by Michigan researcher Donald Pottorff and his colleagues may be that "children view reading as women's work"(p. 180).

In this report, Pottorff and his colleagues (1996) challenged the assumption that a developmental lag may be the cause of poor reading attitudes among boys. This idea is attributed to the fact that in other countries, little difference is found. These researchers asked students which parent is more likely to read books, magazines and newspapers to them. Mothers were found to read books and magazines to them more often, but the fathers more often read newspapers to them. The researchers concluded that "if reading and writing are seen as gender - inappropriate, then boys may well avoid these activities as much as possible, or at best, simply tolerate them". He also stated "fathers, grandfathers and other significant male role models need to be persuaded to get involved in reading to their children at an early

age" (p. 180).

Not all research supports the fact that reading is a female activity. For example, Bloom, Waite, and Exempt (1970) assessed the effect of reading content in relation to gender. They analyzed the content of over 1300 stories in twelve of the most widely used basal readers in the United States. They found that these stories were of equal interest to boys and girls. This suggested that reader content is generally not biased in terms of interest level for the two sexes.

Gross (1978) examined reading attitudes among the Israeli Kibbutz children. As a test design for his study, he matched male and female children who were expected to be equal in work achievement and communal living style. He found no differences in reading attitudes among the two sexes.

May and Ollila (1981) studied gender attitudes among preschool age girls and boys. Involved in the study were 136 children (68 boys and 68 girls) from day care and kindergarten classrooms. Students were given both a test and an interview including reading related questions. In contrast to elementary and intermediate age school children, these children viewed reading as a predominantly male activity.

Swanson (1982) conducted a study which examined the reading attitudes of first graders. Her experimental group consisted of 370 first grade children in an urban northeast Georgia county. After four months of instruction, she concluded that there are inconsistent attitudes toward reading. She found that it was the social class of a child that most affected the child's reading attitude. There was increased desire as one ascended from the lower end of the social scale to the upper end.

Kelly (1986) examined students' perceptions of the content of reading material as being

either masculine or feminine type material. She included 492 students in her study (255 females and 237 males) from two suburban school districts. Grade levels selected were 2, 4,6,8 and high school. Students reviewed a slide presentation which included various reading activities such as a reading book, TV Guide, mystery book, newspaper, comics, science book, dictionary, animal book, and a poetry book as well as activities not associated with reading. Students were asked to indicate whether each activity was more typical of a girl or a boy. Statistical analysis of the data was done with a chi-square analysis. She concluded that the content of the reading material did influence the way students felt about reading.

Knickerbocker (1989), although not studying attitudinal perceptions of reading preference, did question and try to understand the assumption that girls are superior to boys in reading. He suggested that achievement, and the belief that teachers favor girls in the classroom, could be responsible for this.

Based on a review of the past literature, there is still uncertainty whether children perceive reading as a predominantly girl or boy activity. There seems to be a weak tendency in the United States for children to perceive reading as primarily a girl activity, but this has not been found in other countries. Furthermore, there remains a knowledge gap on what the motivating factors are for either sex to embrace reading activities. There needs to more study to gain further insights into these questions.

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Appendices

Appendix A

ARE YOU A _____GIRL _____BOY ? PLEASE CHECK ONE.

PLEASE INDICATE WHETHER THE FOLLOWING ARE BOY OR GIRL ACTIVITIES.

G - GIRL

B - BOY

	BOY	GIRL
Tennis	_____	_____
Painting	_____	_____
Football	_____	_____
Jump Rope	_____	_____
Reading	_____	_____
Fishing	_____	_____
Swimming	_____	_____
Singing	_____	_____
Housecleaning	_____	_____
Drawing	_____	_____

Appendix B

ARE YOU A _____ GIRL _____BOY ? PLEASE CHECK ONE.

PLEASE INDICATE WHETHER THE FOLLOWING ARE GIRL OR BOYS ACTIVITIES.

G - GIRL

B - BOY

____Sewing
____Mountain Climbing
____Hiking
____Swimming
____Cooking
____Baseball
____Whittling
____Football
____Reading
____Wood Working
____Carving
____Painting
____Singing
____Dancing
____Diving
____Writing
____Model Boats
____Playing with Dolls
____Model Railroads

____Playing Nurse
____Tennis
____Golf
____Checkers
____Chess
____Playing House
____Housecleaning
____Studying
____Jumping Rope
____Gymnastics
____Soccer
____Hockey
____Climbing Trees
____Karate
____Body Building
____Playing Cards
____Playing Pool
____Bowling
____Video Games